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ABSTRACT

The presentation covers assessment and intervention of social interaction skills with emotionally disturbed children. Noting the importance of social interaction skills and yet the neglect of such skills in the literature, the paper advocates a systematic instructional approach to improve the social acceptability of emotionally disturbed children. Assessment, which must precede intervention, should include sociometric ratings and direct and specific observations of interaction. Intervention should address changes for teachers and peers as well as for the disturbed students. Among the intervention approaches considered are group meetings for discussing a problem situation, use of the buddy system, groupings to accommodate the sociometric choices of the special needs child, and playing of compliment games in which students learn to support each other. Teachers are urged to use descriptive praise, provide for group reinforcement, encourage peer tutoring, and model acceptance of the disturbed student. Feedback, counseling, and specific skill training are among the approaches advocated for emotionally disturbed students. (CL)

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Improving the Social Acceptability of Emotionally Disturbed Children

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Not only do emotionally disturbed (E.D.) children tend to function poorly in academic areas, but they tend to experience difficulty in social interaction as well. One of the defining characteristics of emotionally disturbed children as indicated in P.L. 94-142 is "an inability to build or maintain satisfactory interpersonal relationships with peers and teachers" (section 121a.5; originally from Bower, 1960). Yet the individual educational plans written for these students tend to emphasize academic areas and independent work habits, and perhaps the reduction of some extremely inappropriate behaviors. Seldom do educators seem to build into the E.D. students' programs a plan for increasing appropriate social interaction.

There are powerful reasons for giving attention to the social ability and social acceptance of E.D. (or any) children. These include the following:

1. Increased social skill development tends to result in more frequent and longer lasting social interaction. This increased social interaction is, in turn, conducive to further social skill development (Mueller & Brenner, 1977). The amount of social interaction is considered the most significant variable affecting friendship formation and maintenance (Hallinan, 1976).

2. Increased ability to interact socially with others appears to aid cognitive development as well as social and personal development (Lewis & Rosenblum, 1975; Strain, Cooke, & Apolloni, 1976).

3. Mastery of social skills is considered by some personality theorists as essential (though perhaps not sufficient) for a healthy self-concept

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(Elardo & Elardo, 1976). If we can interact appropriately with others, we are likely to receive greater amounts of positive reinforcement from them (Gottman, Gonzo, & Rasmussen, 1975), which may help us in giving more positive reinforcement to ourselves.

4. Peer popularity (as determined by sociometric testing) has been found to relate to several indices of mental health, including reduced incidence of psychiatric referral, delinquency, and suicide (Gottman et al., 1975).

5. Our success and reported happiness in our everyday environment seems to depend as much or more on our ability to get along with others as on talent, above-average intelligence, or non-social achievement (O'Malley, 1977).

With the definite need for improving social skills and acceptability of E.D. students and the strong evidence supporting the significance of this area, one might question why it is still so infrequently given sufficient attention. There are probably a number of factors underlying this neglect, including inadequate and unsystematic methodology for measuring and evaluating social ability, a lack of the detailed, systematic hierarchy of appropriate skills characterizing many academic areas (see Stephens, 1978, for a refreshing attempt to develop this detail), and the degree to which the social domain is affected

by values issues, As teachers of these students, we cannot afford to wait until the field is systematized before we begin our intervention efforts.

Assessment

As with academic areas, assessment of social skill and acceptability must precede intervention. The assessment process in behavioral areas typically begins with teacher referral, often utilizing a teacher rating. As there is presently no rating scale of which this presenter is aware that deals specifically with social skill and acceptability, it may be sufficient for the teacher simply to identify students s/he views as lacking or inappropriate in social skill or acceptability. A two-pronged identification would be preferable, whereby students lacking skills are distinguished from those who have the social skills but appear unmotivated to use them, perhaps due to greater immediate "payoffs" for inappropriate social behavior.

The most frequently used method of assessing social acceptability is a sociometric rating, which could serve as a second indicator in our assessment. Here, students select the peers (usually three to five) with whom they most like to interact (eg. to play with at recess, or to eat lunch with). They may also be asked to identify the three to five peers with whom they would not like to interact. Since research has indicated that on the less desirable end of the selection continuum are ignored rather than actively rejected students (Gottlieb,

Semmel, & Veldman, 1978), both positive and negative sociometric choices are needed to identify both types of students. Sociometric data also reveal the highly selected student who may be useful as a peer helper in later intervention strategires.

Probably key to the assessment process is direct observation of a student's interaction with peers. This may be broad based or highly specific. Broad based observation may simply keep track of the percentage of time a student spends in appropirate and inappropriate interaction, and alone. Each of these categories would have to be clearly defined, if reliable data are to be collected. For example, behaviors recorded as "alone" may include not only totally isolated behaviors but also watching of peers from the sidelines without interaction, and parallel play. A little more controversial is the classification of talking with adults; some students seem to use this activity as a means of avoiding peer interaction.

Examples of behaviors coded as positive interaction include the obvious ones of conversing or laughing with peers, but also participation in an organized game, even during moments when no immediate interaction is occurring.

Examples of behaviors that are likely to be recorded as negative interaction include hitting, kicking, name calling, insulting, and verbally rejecting. Perhaps most difficult to code is roughhousing behaviors, where children are "playfully" pushing and shoving. In this case, other non-verbal cues like smiles or frowns and the degree of force involved may be helpful in determining whether positive

or negative interaction is occurring.

Again, with this three category coding system, children who are withdrawn and children who interact inappropriately can be distinguished. Withdrawn children should spend a large percentage of time alone, while children who interact inappropriately should have a larger than usual percentage of negative interaction recorded.

Specific observations can be made of behaviors assumed important for adequate social interaction. It should be noted that our research supported knowledge base in this area is still in the "intelligent guess" or "professional hunch" category. Few behaviors have been empirically demonstrated to be vital for appropriate social interaction (Van Hassette, Hersen, Whitehall, & Bellack, 1979).

Behaviors involved in initiating interactions are frequently selected for observation (and later intervention). These may include greeting another, beginning a conversation, asking to join or be joined in a play activity, and asking a question of another.

Once an interaction has begun, there are a number of behaviors conducive to maintaining that interaction. Possible targets of observation are conversing, sharing, taking turns, cooperating at an activity, smiling and laughing, and play skills. Listening and emphathic responding could also be observed. Language and motor pre-requisites are common to social skillfulness.

Socially skillful children also need ways to resolve conflict: means for minimizing physically aggressive behaviors of others and ways to respond to verbally abusive or rejecting comments. Responses to these negative behaviors from peers could be subject to specific observation.

A thorough assessment also may need to examine <u>others</u> in the student's environment. Sometimes increasing the student's social acceptability dosen't mean just changing him or her but also modifying the ability of others to accept differences in children.

In school settings, a high amount of social conformity seems the rule; perhaps the limits of what is acceptable can be extended, whereby both peers and teachers can be more socially supportive than they presently are to children with special needs.

<u>Intervention</u>

Let's say your assessment is complete; you know what your goals are in terms of social skills and acceptability for a given E.D. student. Now what? In this section, intervention strategies falling into three categories will be discussed: those aimed at changes in the classmates of the E.D. student, changes in teaching strategies and those focusing on the E.D. student him/herself. The supposition behind this division is that attention should be given to changing teacher and peers of an emotionally disturbed child as well as that child.

Unfortunately, there are no easy or pat answers for what to do with a socially unacceptable child. But we are beginning to gather some data on strategies that have made a difference with some students in some settings. All strategies presented here have been researched and found to be successful in at least one study, as presented in the social interaction literature that is developing.

For regular classmates. Strategies aiming at changing classmates focus primarily on regular classroom peers, as the regular classroom is still the preferred setting, given that the E.D. student can be successful there. All four strategies included in this area involve students supporting rather than competing with one another.

Group meetings can be held on a regularly scheduled basis or following a social problem situation. Through discussion and role playing methods, students can be taught a greater awareness of others' feelings, what fairness is, what it means to be in a relationship, and similar social cognition goals. After altercations, student awareness may be increased as to how it takes two to have a fight, and how hostile or self-defensive statements can escalate a situation.

A buddy system seems to work most effectively with withdrawn students. In this strategy, a popular, cooperative student is asked to include the problem child in play situations for a limited period of time. Caution should be taken that the "buddy" is willing to participate (although the way a teacher asks for this assistance can make this more likely; be positive and enthusiastic). Several

students may take turns being buddies, perhaps for a week each. Everyone can win: withdrawn student gains a helper, and the "buddy" learns a lesson in social responsibility.

A similar strategy involves grouping students for projects and in class activities to support the sociometric choices of the special needs child. A caution: don't group E.D. students with someone they have chosen who has indicated s/he didn't want to play with our handicapped students.

Finally, get kids playing compliment games. The goal is for students to learn to support one another (and the classroom climate) by giving legitimate compliments to each other. At first, compliments tend to be based on physical characteristics primarily (eg. "I like your blue shirt.") but with time and modeling, students can become quite aware of each others' strengths.

For teacher. Teachers can make some alterations in their usual teaching and reinforcement practices which can have a positive effect on individuals within their classrooms, and help to build a positive classroom atmosphere. One tactic is to use descriptive praise; especially for cooperative and appropriate social behavior, but also for behaviors in general. Descriptive praise tells a student exactly what s/he is doing that is working; for example, "you took turns beautifully today." This type of praise avoids two potential hazards of other praise statements: it avoids the comparisons that can lead to competition or giving up (eg. only one student can be the recipient of "you are the best behaved student in this class") and it assures that the student knows what s/he is doing well. General statements

like "nice playing," although helpful to building a more positive conception of oneself, may be too vague to cue the student to develop specific social or behavioral attributes.

Using group rewards is another strategy where everyone can be a winner, and contribute to oneself while also contributing to the entire class. Group reinforcement has been shown to foster a cooperative spirit within the classroom. For example, class members as individuals can earn points or tokens for a group party, or subgroups can earn rewards for meeting a subgroup goal. It is important, if a group goal is to be used, that all members of the class are capable of meeting that goal, with support.

Teachers can encourage peer tutoring, in conjunction with group rewards or separately. When students support one another in this manner, they are learning that knowledge and competency have their responsibilities as well as their rewards. Successful tutoring can result in a payoff in self-esteem for both tutor and tutee; the tutor knows s/he is contributing to another (especially if we use descriptive praise to tell him/her), while the tutee is gaining new skills or knowledge.

It is also important for the teacher to model his or her acceptance of the E.D. student. This may be difficult at times, since certain behaviors of this child may be highly unacceptable. Yet they aren't (even though it may seem that way) performing these undesirable behaviors all the time; it is vital that we seek out and find positive attributes in each student. Especially in early elementary years, students tend to adopt the attitude of their teacher, so it is up to us to model the

values we'd like them to develop.

For the E.D. student: Our emotionally disturbed child typically needs to develop some new behaviors and ways of relating if s/he is going to function successfully in life. Some ways of developing these may need to occur outside the classroom, but with plans for generalization and reinforcement back to the regular setting.

Specific skills training may be needed. Typically, a small group setting with two to six children, is appropriate for this. Skills of initiating and maintaining social contact may be taught, as well as methods for solving conflict situations. Teaching includes a minimum of direct instruction; modeling and a chance for behavioral rehearsal predominate. Multiple chances to actually practice a particular skill may be provided, such that overlearning results. Practice should be extended and reinforced, through "homework," into the natural environment (eg. recess).

The hero procedure is a twist on a reinforcement program whereby the student earns rewards or privileges for himself or herself and others too, and thus gets to be a "hero" or special person to other members of the class. The "others" involved in the reinforcement can be just one other person (eg. the child earns a trip out to dinner for herself and a close friend), a small group (eg. the student earns a party, which includes some subtle social skills training, for a small group of peers), or the entire class (eg. the student earns minutes towards an extra

recess for the entire class). Caution generally must be taken that the procedure has a positive emphasis such that peers will support the child rather than castigating him or her for failure. One way to do this is to make failure impossible; reaching the goal just will take longer if the student doesn't extend himself.

The barb technique is useful with a student who is frequently teased or verbally rejected by peers, and has an overreaction to such harrassment that results in greater difficulties for all involved parties. This strategy attempts desensitization of the student by intentional, scheduled teasing or rejecting comments in a controlled, safe setting. The student is previously told what to expect and has discussed appropriate responses to such teasing. Once the teasing has begun, the child is reinforced for responding in new, appropriate ways. The distinction between fact and opinion can be made where appropriate; many teasing comments are the opinion of the teaser, which doesn't make them the "truth."

Feedback to a student on their social performance in the actual play setting is probably essential. Consider beginning with comments only on what they did well. Later, rapport typically becomes stronger and the child grows in the ability to handle mixed feedback (ie. what they have done that hasn't as well as has worked in the social setting).

The student can be trained to be skilled in a desired play activity. This strategy involves determining an activity that is popular and has status among a particular group with whom the student is in regular contact, and then providing

instruction and practice in that activity. Skill at sports activities especially seems to increase social acceptability.

Counseling can be provided, dealing with self-concept and personal areas as well as the interpersonal. This can be done individually or in a group, as needed. Ultimately, group counseling seems especially appropriate for social concerns; social skills training is actually one form of group counseling.

Allowing the student to play or otherwise interact with younger students is a final strategy to consider. Children with limited social skills frequently spontaneously seek out younger playmates; now it appears that there may be a useful reason to allow and even encourage this occurrence. It appears that younger children may be at a more compatible social level to our special needs child; this social similarity may promote social development.

Changing the social ability or acceptability of an E.D. student is not an easy task. The intent of this presentation was not to make social development seem like a simple goal, but to stress that it may be a vitally important goal and that a teacher may be able to significantly affect such development through the utilization of a variety of strategies.

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